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ABSTRACT

Using ethnographic research techniques, a study examined the nature of the process whereby a three-member collaborative writing group responded to literature and to each other through a local area network (LAN) and also generated a group composition. The three subjects--of varied educational backgrounds--discussed questions associated with a novel over the LAN in a recursive style, providing a positive social context for collaboration in a teacher-structured context. In a student-structured context, the emphasis was on the product (a collaborative essay) rather than on the process (analyzing text). The context and process of the collaboration changed because the focus of the task changed. The LAN was only used at the end to "hook" the separately written pieces of the essay together and not to negotiate the separate tasks. Findings suggest possibilities for visualizing a variety of ways in which the collaborative writing process might occur; may help instructors see the advantages of collaborative writing in a course; and suggest a way to study collaborative groups to find out what they actually do. (Four figures are included.) (RS)

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Shaping Literary Response through Collaborative Writing

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SHAPING LITERARY RESPONSE

THROUGH COLLABORATIVE WRITING

My purpose in this study was to examine the nature of the collaborative process as members of one collaborative writing group responded to literature and to each other through a local area network, and generated a group composition for whole class discussion.

The ethnograpic techniques of participant observation, interviewing, and transcription analysis were central to my study. These techniques allowed me to access the insiders' views of the collaborative process as it was understood by the instructor and the students. Also, I was able to make comparisons among these views and then compare them to the processes that I observed (Overhead #1--Data Sources).

Ethnographic research is an appropriate methodology for looking at collaboration because it brings theory and research into the natural context of the classroom. In this classroom a collaboration between the students and the instructor evolved. The technique of participant observation established two other collaborative relationships, the first between the instructor and observer, and the second between the class community and the observer. The exchange of information, questions, and perceptions between all of these players was crucial to the eventual interpretations of the patterns and processes observed.

The reciprocal nature of these collaborations provided for an important outcome: As they reflected on the processes they participated in, the roles of the instructor and students expanded and they became active participants in the research.

This methodology was also helpful in understanding the collaborative writing process' effect on response to literature. Looking at students' responses to the texts and to one another in the LAN, provided insight into how collabortion facilitates students' understanding of literature and their ability to write about it.

Two definitions of collaborative writing provided the framework for studying this process; the first, developed by Eugene, corresponded directly to the goals of the class and provided the operational definition of collaborative writing for the group. This definition read: Learning to cooperate with others in the development and clear articulation of ideas in written form; i.e., production of a group-written response to an assigned text (Smith, 1987).

The second, explicated in LeFevre's work Invention as a Social Act (1987), provided the conceptual definition of social contexts for invention. LeFevre notes that certain social contexts seem to provide the conditions that make true collaborative invention possible. Two of these conditions are: 1) "contact with an audience whom writers can address and by whom they can be acknowledged;" and 2) "regular contact with

others with whom writers can debate ideas and evolve common standards" (p. 75-76). These two definitons guided my initial observations and provided the framework for analyzing the collaborative writing process of the group I studied.

The key concepts guiding my initial description and analysis included the social context, the community of the classroomm, the discourse (both oral and written), and the interaction of the group members with the text and with one another. As data analysis proceeded, I refined these global concepts into the specific questions which I'll address today:

1) What is the social context of the collaborative process?
2) How does discourse (both oral and written) develop within the collaborative framework?

The group I'm reporting on consisted of three members; Steve, Karen, and Henry. Each came from varying educational backgrounds. Steve, a returning student, had not yet declared a major. Karen was an English major, and Henry a computer science major. Although the course description stated that computer use was an integral part of the course, none of these students took the course for this reason. Rather, all stated that the course content, Fantasy, and the reading list led to their decision to enroll. Of the three, only Henry had had much experience with computers, and none had ever written or worked collaboratively in other classes.

I attended class and gathered data for the entire quarter

from September through December, a period of ten weeks. As mentioned earlier, my data sources consisted of observational field notes from the class and the LAN, interviews, and the LAN files of the group. My data analysis provides a description of two social contexts for collaboration as they were experienced by this group, and provides insight into how discourse developed within these collaborative frameworks.

The models that emerged from the data show that two contexts for collaboration were established. The first one is identified as the teacher structured context (Overhead #2--Teacher Structured Context). This was the context that guided the course as a whole. All class members, in their own groups, worked within this framework as they read, generated questions, discussed, and wrote about the texts.

Two settings contributed to the interaction pattern the small group developed in this context--the classroom and the LAN. In class the group met and generated questions about a text. These questions were then used for large group discussion. The LAN provided for further interaction and collaboration between the group members as they responded to the text, often extending/elaborating class discussions. The interaction pattern in these settings-- which went from small group question generaton, to large group discussion, to small group extension of questions through writing, was recursive in this context, as was the shift between oral and written discourse.

An example drawn from LAN entries of the target group's responses to Mary Shelley's Frankenstein illustrates how this context worked. Steve's initial entry reflected his interpretation of both theme and technique, and provided evaluative statements of this novel with respect to the romantic quest, a topic that had been discussed in class.

Koski.3

...In framing "Frankenstein, Walton also portrays the romantic philosophy....It is through this framing device that Shelley gives the reader an added dimension of credibility to the story as well as mimicking the romantic quest. Is Shelley telling us that the tragic flaw is tampering with Mother Nature or Frankenstein abandoning and then reversing his romantic quest? Or both?

In responding to Steve's entry both Karen and Henry addressed the notion of the tragic flaw, and provided their own interpretations and evaluation of this aspect of the novel as well. Karen's response read:

Koski 3.akz

...The tragic flaw you speak of is suggestive of Frankenstein being a tragic hero. Personally, I do not feel Frankenstein to be a hero, tragic or not, though this opinion is definitely not

shared by all....I felt that this mistake was indeed Frankenstein's desertion of the monster; however, the idea of tampering with the laws of nature was another Big Mistake, the original one....

Henry also addressed the notion of the tragic flaw:

Koski 3.ahg ...I agree with you about the idea of the tragic flaw. It doesn't seem to make sense, because Fankenstein was given two important choices throughout the book. "Should I find the principle of life?" and "Now that I have found it should I continue using it?"

It is through their responses to Steve that we can see the the development of written discourse within this collaborative context. In this recursive cyle, Steve entered his response into the Lan and was answered by Karen and Henry. This cycle provided Steve, and each member in turn, with an audience whom he/she could address, and by whom he/she could be acknowledged. This fulfilled one of the conditions, according to LeFevre's definition, that is necessary for a positive social context for collaboration.

Although this cycle didn't lead to an actual collaborative product, the process itself was collaborative, and provided a forum for each writer to continue to develop and refine his/her

ideas and responses in writing. In the LAN, literary response was shaped and facilitated by this interaction or collaboration with the audience-that is, the readers responding to the writer. Within the teacher structured context, this group's interaction pattern was process oriented and focused on the text. Both settings were integral parts of the context and were used routinely and effectively by the group as they developed and refined their interpretations of the texts they had read.

The second model derived from the data, is identified as the student structured context (Overheads #3 and #4-- Student Structured Context). This is the context that Steve, Karen, and Henry developed and worked within as they collaborated on an essay based on Thomas Pynchon's The Crying of Lot 49. The structure that evolved for this group deviated from both the teacher structured structured context, and the suggested guidelines for generating collaborative writings. The teacher structured context was very process oriented, and the guidelines built on this, keeping the LAN as an integral part of the collaborative process. However, a change in the settings in which the group met and interacted, and a change in the focus of their initial meeting interrupted the cyclical, recursive process seen in the first context.

This group established a social context for meeting outside of the class (as was suggested) and the LAN (an unanticipated factor) until the final phase of putting their composition

together. The most evident change in the group's interaction pattern was in the focus--which was product oriented, and which initially diverted the group's attention to the task and away from discussing and responding to the text. The task emphasis required negotiation of several elements; a strategy for approaching the paper, additional meeting times, and roles, all of which took place in meetings outside of class. Once these elements were negotiated, the group divided the labor into individual pieces for which each person was responsible. How did these meetings facilitate the collaborative writing process? A closer look at the oral discouse that developed during these meetings illustrates the effect this social context had on the collaborative writing process.

The group had four meetings over the course of one month. In the first meeting, the group planned a strategy for approaching the book and figuring out what they wanted to say. Steve suggested that they stay with approach of addressing theme and technique, and all agreed that they would "play it straight" and write this as an essay, not one of the other forms that had already been used,; i.e., dialogue, letters. Though all agreed that assigning roles as suggested by Eugene wasn't necessary, Steve tacitly assumed leadersip role. They negotiated for another meeting time to discuss the text after they'd reread it.

The second meeting began with more task negotiation--with the group members agreeing that they still needed to brainstorm

separately as well as together in order to to generate possible topics for their paper. Steve acknowleged this strategy, but then initiated a shift of focus from the task to the text by addressing the fantasy element of the text. This led to exploratory talk of possible themes and to Steve's idea of approaching the text as social commentary. This was a fast paced interaction with all of the members contributing ideas and opinions.

Steve: We could look at it like a social commentary--like Bobok almost. What we've got here are people caught up in a system tht ends up destroying them.

Henry: There are four alternatives presented at the end of the book. Those are four things that could be ...

Steve: We could have a discussion focusing on the book as social commntary--how screwed up society is....

Karen: There's so much in there I think we ought to be careful about what we choose.

Both Steve and Henry's ideas appeared in the final composition, although at this point no one in the group had actually written anything.

By the third meeting the focus had shifted almost entirely to the text. Steve came to this meeting with a first, handwritten draft addressing the text as social commentary, and both Karen and Henry identified themes that they were interested in--entropy and mass culture. There were three outcomes to this meeting: 1) the identification of the themes the group would address in their essay (topic identificaton); 2) the identification of the topic/theme each member would adresss (division of topics); and 3) the decision of how they would utilize the LAN (each would take a section, write on that, and then get together in the LAN to synthesize and edit).

At meeting four the emphasis was on cohesion. All had written individual compositions outside of class and had entered them into the same LAN file. Steve's first, Henry's second, then Karen's. They discussed and generated transitions that would link the three sections together. Even though they had planned to use the LAN to synthesize and edit, they couldn't negotiate a time when all could meet in there together. This task fell to Steve who, though still the unacknowledged leader, had great investment in having a clear and cohesive piece to present to the class.

The major qualitative difference between these two contexts--the teacher structured and student structured --is seen in the settings that were established for response, and in which

discourse developed. Most notable in this group's context and collaborative process was the absence of the LAN. Rather than using it in an interactive way to express and elaborate ideas as they did with other texts, it was used only in the last stages of production as a tool to "hook" individual compositions together. Why did this change occur? The context and process seemed to change because of task focus: negotiation of the task was undertaken in small group meetings. When the focus did shift to the text the format remained the same--outside of class meetings and outside of the LAN. The interaction pattern established in this context determined the style in which the group divided and coordinated their work.

Time to meet and to complete the process emerged as a critical factor influencing the group's work. The role that Steve played, though viewed differently by the group members seemed a critical factor in this process as well, and poses the question-- if this group hadn't had a "Steve" as a catalyst to move the focus to the text in the meetings, would the LAN have been used, and woud it have helped?

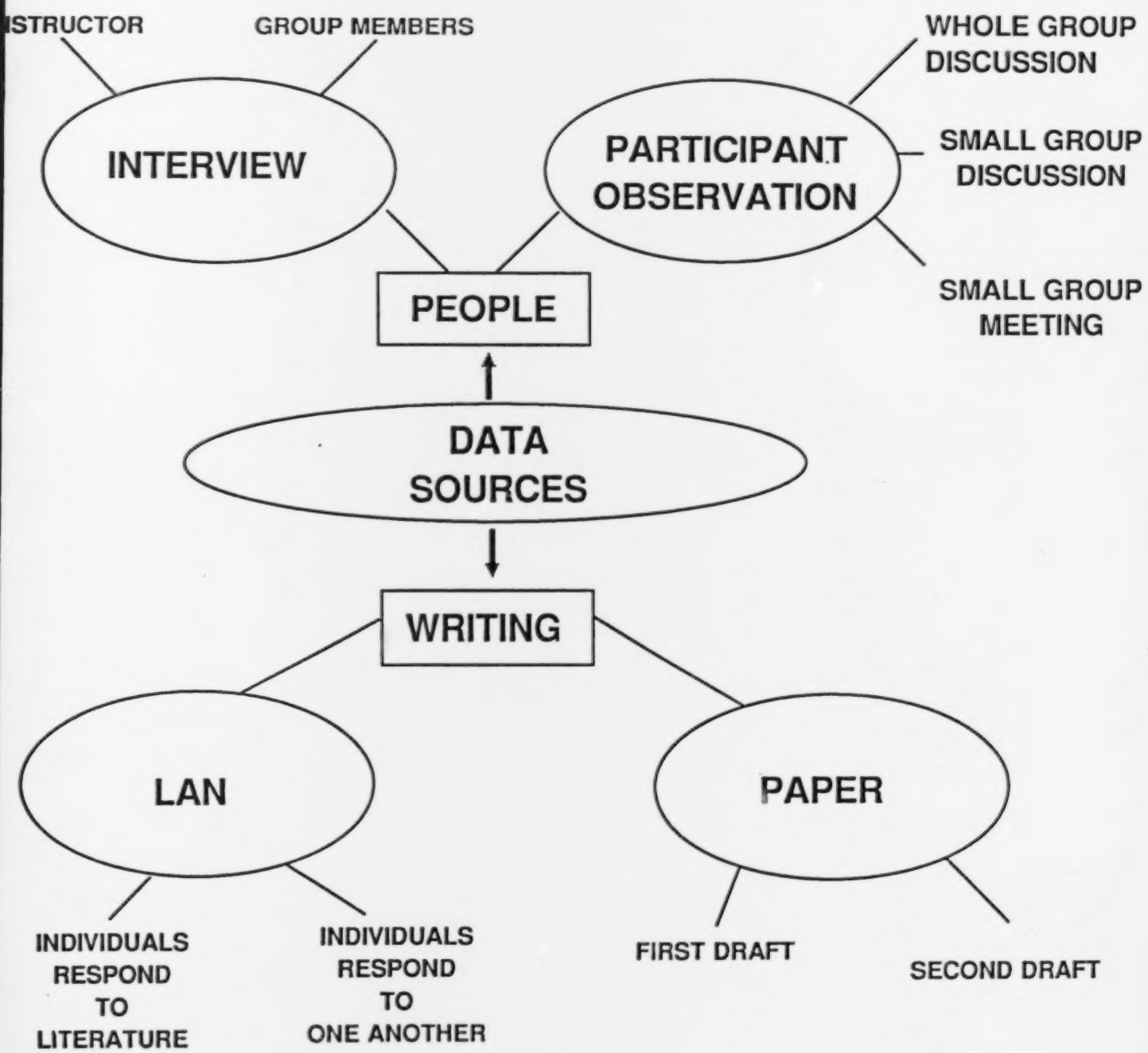
The next question we can ask is "Did the group produce a collaborative piece?" All the members agreed that their essay was a collborative work, and were positive about the process they worked through to produce it. Referring back to the definitional framework --the operational definition for collaborative writing was met in that a cohesive piece of writing was developed and

clearly articulated.

LeFevre: Teacher structured and group structured contexts provided the necessary elements for the collaborative act of invention; i.e., 1) contact with a group whom they can address and by whom they can be acknowledged-- this occured in the teacher structured context within the small group. In the student context the audience expanded to include the entire class (the group composition was distributed/read by whole class and became basis for discussion); and 2) regular contact with others with whom they can debate and evolve common standards (began with teacher structured contexts in class and in the LAN, part of this process was internalized and carried over to the group-structured context of out-of-class meetings. Exploratory talk helped the group evolve common standards for the tone and the focus of the essay. Group members: Face-to-face meetings facilitated the collaborative process by helping members construct and elaborate the meaning of the text; identify topics/areas of interest for individual contributions to the group piece.

By referring these findings back to the larger framework of educational pedogogy as it is being developed and adapted to include collaborative writing, we gain a greater understanding of our changing roles as instructors, and can consider how meaningful collaborative tasks can be developed and implemmented in our classes. More specifically, the findings from this study

help us see the possibilities of collaborative writing within the courses we teach; suggest possibilities for visualizing different ways the collaborative process might occur; and finally, suggest a way to study collaborative groups to find out what they actually do.


ISTRUCTOR
GROUP MEMBERS
INTERVIEW
WHOLE GROUP DISCUSSION
PARTICIPANT OBSERVATION
SMALL GROUP DISCUSSION
SMALL GROUP MEETING
PEOPLE
DATA SOURCES
WRITING
LAN
PAPER
INDIVIDUALS RESPOND TO LITERATURE
INDIVIDUALS RESPOND TO ONE ANOTHER
FIRST DRAFT
SECOND DRAFT

overhead #1

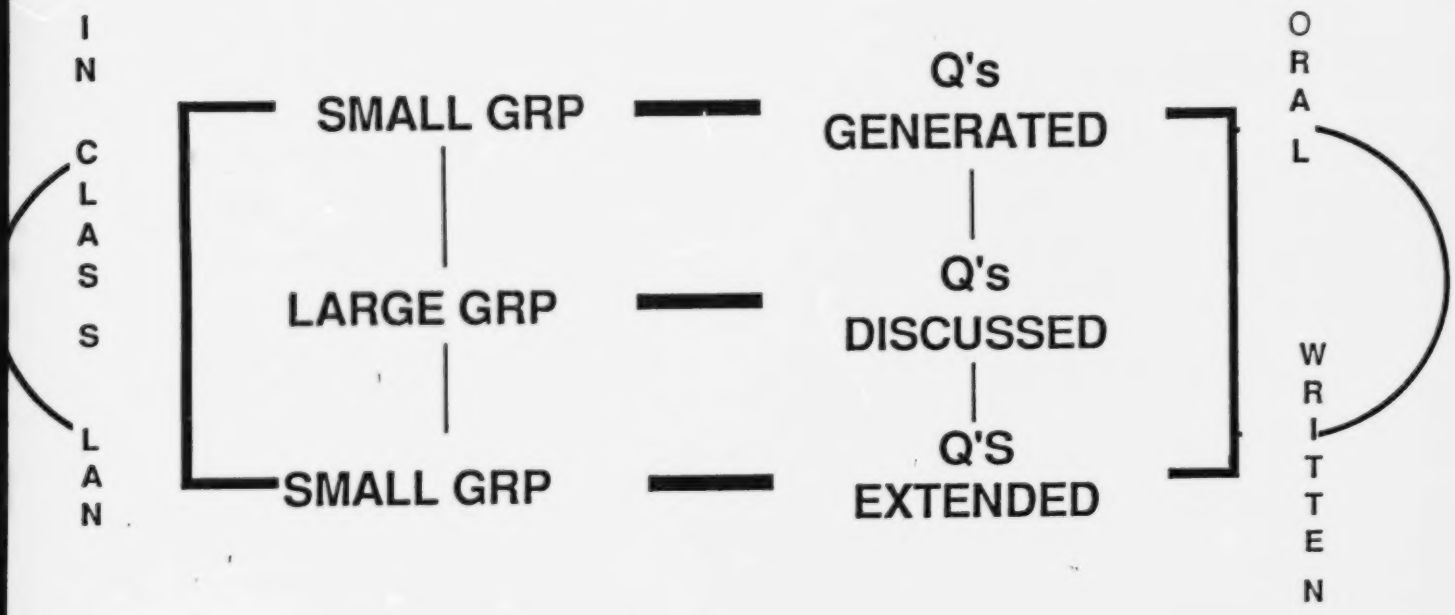
TEACHER STRUCTURED CONTEXT

SOCIAL CONTEXT

DISCOURSE TYPE

INTERACTION PATTERN

FOCUS: TEXT

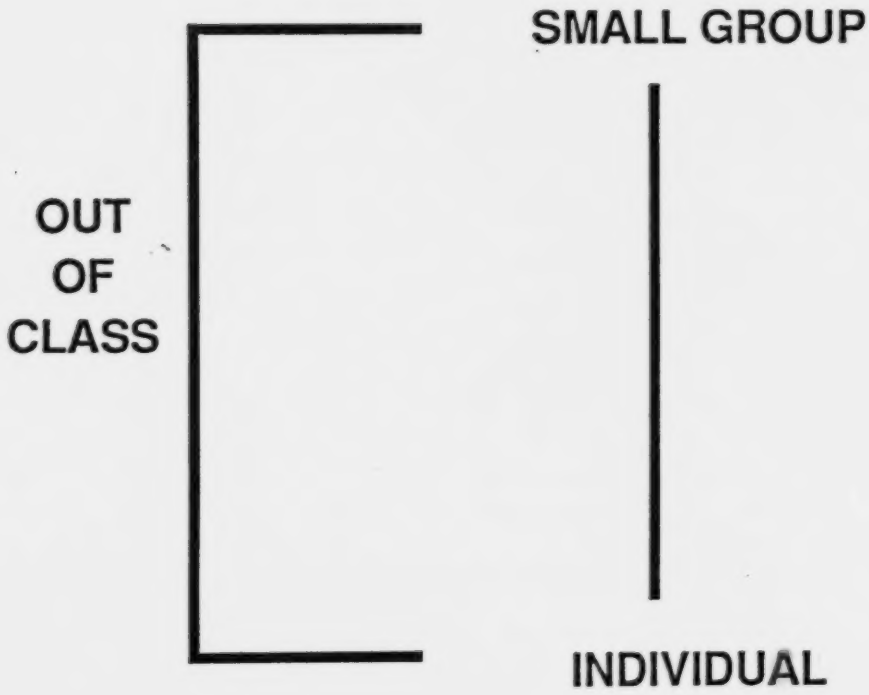


Overhead #2

STUDENT STRUCTURED CONTEXT

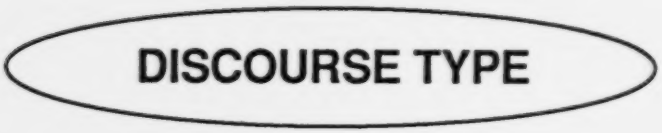
SOCIAL CONTEXT

INTERACTION PATTERN:



Overhead #3

STUDENT STRUCTURED CONTEXT



FOCUS:

	TASK	TEXT	
GROUP	STRATEGY	EXPLOR. TALK	ORAL
	TIME	↓	
	ROLE		
INDIVIDUAL	↓		WRITTEN
	DIVIDE LABOR	DIVIDE TOPIC	

Overhead #4